
Hysteria and Femininity: A Tentative Investigation into a Victorian and Edwardian Myth

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to investigate the ambiguous and unsettling relationship between hysteria and femininity that are commonly allied in Victorian and Edwardian eras. Based on the medical narratives of various hysterical women shown in fictional and operatic texts, it meticulously discusses Anglo-American feminist scholars and their French counterparts' different responses to and interpretative strategies for the same texts, calling for the integration of these two perspectives—a meaningful fusion of humanity and philosophy, essentialisation and romanticisation in ultimately deconstructing the patriarchal myth.

Key Words: Hysteria, Femininity, Myth, Perspectives, Integration

1. INTRODUCTION

So far, a host of intriguing studies have been made about the medical construction of Victorian and Edwardian women portrayed in narratives of fiction and operas. What highlights these various approaches is the scholars' overwhelming emphasis on the unsettling relationship between femininity and hysteria, a conspicuous malady that is said to be rather prevalent and yet repressed and erased from public view in Victorian and Edwardian times.

Despite the common focus they tend to share, scholars fail to reach a consensus on the nature, meaning and consequences of this relationship.

For Anglo-American feminist philosophers like Shoshana Felman and Genevieve Lloyd, hysteria is a disease that is deliberately and certainly unjustifiably assigned to women alone. Within the dualistic systems of language and representation, "woman" and "insanity" are, more often than not, blended into each other as if interchangeable. The diehard "binary opposition" necessitates the women to be situated on the "feminine" side of irrationality, silence, nature and body, thus differentiating themselves from men's "masculine" side of reason, discourse, culture and mind. Even if the hysterical body happens to be male, he is also regarded as unmanly, or feminine in another form.

For liberal and even audacious French feminists like H   ne Cixous and Xavi  re Gauthier, the picture is utterly different. In their views, instead of being a stereotyped analogical label placed on women, hysteria serves as a deliberate, extreme and useful weapon for potential feminist causes in which silence is shattered, and discourse is admirably regained. From Freud's Dora to Ibsen's Nora, these "admirable hysterics" manage to air all that their repressed sisters and daughters desperately desire and tightly hold in the end.

In my view, the divergence concerning the relationship between femininity and hysteria from these different cultural backgrounds is not merely an accidental one, but a habitual one that can unexpectedly shed more light on the issue discussed. In a more balanced light, neither of the views above offers a serious, undistorted mirror with which we can truly and historically look at the cultural construction of hysteria and hysterical women. Neither romanticisation nor essentialisation can stand on its own. A balance between these two urgently needs to be struck in future related studies.

2. ARTISTIC REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN VICTORIAN AND EDWARDIAN FICTION AND OPERAS: ANGLO-AMERICAN AND FRENCH PERSPECTIVES

Artistically speaking, the images of mad and hysterical women that receive different interpretations from the scholars above, populate multiple novels of the Victorian and Edwardian ages, including the classic Bertha Mason in Charlotte Bront  's *Jane Eyre*, Gwendolen Harleth in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, and Miss Havisham in Charles Dickens'

Great Expectations. They equally abound in Victorian and Edwardian operas like the eponymous heroines from Donizetti's Lucia di Lammermoor, Richard Strauss's Salome and Elektra.

Individually looked at, they seem to bear different types of madness that defy ready or neat categorisation. For example, Bertha Mason is an obviously beastly Jamaican maniac, Gwendolen Harleth is a melancholy and self-conscious British "Ophelia", Miss Havisham is a maniac that is as eccentric as complicated, while Salome and Elektra are all deliberate maniacs who take madness as a weird aesthetic delight.

However, when paired with each other, they also reveal alarming and unexpected affinities in a variety of ways, bodily, psychologically and behaviorally, bringing into light those social, religious, and ideological forces at work, which can possibly echo and redress the polar views of both the Anglo-American and the French feminist thought on the same issue.

2.1 Sexualizing the Female Hysteric's Body

The first affinity among these diverse hysterical women is their overwhelming display of body, which is highly sexualized and erotically charged to unprecedented extent. Bertha Mason's large hands, Gwendolen Harleth's dilated nostrils and lips, Miss Havisham's sinisterly virgin body, and the dancing body of Salome do give us pleasures, however absurd or distasteful. The most heightened hysteria and orgasm reach their alliances on the female hysteric's body.

In the Anglo-American culture, conservative religious guidance such as Puritanism and realistic outlooks, still serve as a handy and popular yardstick. This well explains why the feminists from such a culture easily and in a way rightfully take offences at all the female bodily spectacles that exhibit themselves in these literary and operatic settings. They can find nothing but injuries and wounds inscribed on these female bodies, thus losing the interest in finding the potential signs of certain hysterics on them at positive work.

As Terry Eagleton, a prominent British New Marxist theorist argues, the female hysterical body is "so obvious, obtrusive a matter as to have been blandly overlooked for centuries...and is currently *en route* to becoming the greatest fetish of all."¹ The word "fetish" is very striking, for it implies the commodified nature of strange bodies or body positions, especially those of the women. When women's bodies are reduced to merchandise, they fundamentally and surely lose their individuality, not to mention the possible rebellion or fight for their rights with this body. Any attempt to eulogize such dismembered bodies is bound to arouse suspicion, distaste or dismissal, for the hypocrisy is all too obviously involved.

When tracing the history of hysterical female bodies, Peter Brooks, a very noted American scholar also insightfully points out, "The hysterical body is of course typically, from Hippocrates through Freud, a woman's body, and indeed a victimized woman's body, on which

¹ Eagleton, Terry. *The Illusions of Postmodernism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 25 (1996)

desire has inscribed an impossible history, a history of desire at an impasse... (The female body) appears to be in an almost impossible position...rigid, already nearly inanimate, like a mummy or a puppet, a bleached image, *pallida morte futura*. It is a pure image of victimization, and of the body whole seized by affective meaning, of message converted into the body so forcefully and totally that the body has ceased to function in its normal postures and gestures, to become nothing but text, nothing but the place of representation.”² Such words as “victimized” and “victimization” indeed ring alarmingly pessimistic and despairing to any knowing ear.

In the French culture, the atmosphere tends to be more liberal, allowing for more positive interpretations in texts, even not excluding those ostensibly sadist ones. Thus, indulgence in body is often seen as a highly metaphorical and symbolic act with liberating consequences. Any allusion to or mention of the sexualized female body is not necessarily considered as vicious practice that belittles women. Instead, this may exactly show the uniqueness of female strength and power, as Luce Irigaray confidently declares in her bold book, “This sex... is not one”, thus gaining superiority to men, who only has one single Phallus to marvel at.

For Des Esseintes, this all-too-famous French male, Salome has “the disquieting *delirium* of the dancer, the *subtle grandeur* of the murderess”³. A female “demon” or “monster” in the English sense becomes utterly romanticized or estheticized in the French context. If this is not enough to prove the French obsession with female hysterics like Salome, Des Esseintes certainly has much more to say, “She had become, as it were, the symbolic incarnation of undying Lust, the Goddess of immortal Hysteria, he accursed Beauty exalted above all other beauties by the catalepsy that hardens her flesh and steels her muscles, the monstrous Beast, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, poisoning, like the Helen of ancient myth, everything that approaches her, everything that sees her, everything that she touches.”⁴ The comparison of Salome to Helen is very striking, for Helen is said to be one of the first women who manage to earn a due place in man’s narratives, whose will for revenge and destruction alerts men to her unique and no longer overlooked presence in the male-dominated world. In other words, a female hysteric’s body writes “her self” into a “her-story” in active making, defying the “history”. This body is necessarily hyperbolically making its repressed message overt, present, visible, acting out, stretching a legible register of the message, a semantic field of discourse available to potential hegemony.

² Brooks, Peter. “Body and Voice in Melodrama and Opera,” in: Mary Ann Smart (ed.), *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 120 (2000).

³ Huysmans, Joris-Karl. *Against Nature (A Rebours)*. Trans. Robert Baldick. London: Penguin, 65 (1959). The italics are mine.

⁴ Ibid, 66.

2.2 Rendering the Female Hysterical Speechless

The second affinity among these female hysterics is their coerced loss or incoherence of speech. The sound issuing from Bertha Mason's mouth is so frighteningly grotesque and incoherent that it can hardly be called a human voice; In utter fright and bewilderment, Gwendolen Harleth can merely scream and squeak like a small and fragile animal; Miss Havisham seems eternally obsessed with the utterance of such witchlike words as "break his heart"; Salome feverishly indulges in the song-less "dance of the seven veils", utterly subjected to the predatory gazes from Herod the king.

In the Anglo-American culture, language or speech as a discourse still largely enjoys a privileged status, interwoven with such worldly matters as wealth and reputation. The inherently hierarchical structure is often hidden from public view, yet it tends to surface and resurface in due time. This explains why Anglo-American feminists largely refuse or fail to see the subversive potential of a seemingly voiceless female hysteric. To a radically feminist ear, any argument for hysteria's deconstructive role amounts to self-deception or sheer illusion. Hysteria is nothing but hysteria, a manner of non-speech.

Compared to it, the French culture tends to encourage a playful or subversive gesture regarding the linguistic hegemony. As a result, any irregular combination of words or phrases, such as those sounds made by a female hysteric, bears a highly symbolic meaning that "other"s not the female hysteric herself, but those who originally attempt to alienate or prevail over her by silencing or reducing her voice. In other words, the female hysteric creates a special vocal means of information transmission that is beyond the males' grasp; and then even creates an entirely fresh hystericized soundscape that is hard to ignore or dismiss and can do even more than the hystericized body. This functions as a good explanation for the French feminists' preference for those female hysterical "divas" that are as heroic and brave as more traditional role models like Joan of Arc in their eyes.

For Roland Barthes, a prominent French philosopher, when vocality includes both language and non-language such as hysterical sounds, namely a dual production and a dual gesture, this is a space where the normative functionality of language can be transcended, and where signification gives away to significance that enables the hysteric's voice to "escape the tyranny of meaning"⁵.

Catherine Clément and Hélène Cixous, two radical French philosophers, go even further by claiming the musicality (non-language-ness) of female madness or hysteria, which is seen to

⁵ Barthes, Roland. "The Grain of the Voice," in: *Image, Music, Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Noonday Press/Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 185 (1977).

originate from “a time before law, before the Symbolic took one’s breath away and reappropriated it into *language* under its authority of separation.”⁶

2.3 Fragmenting and Traumatizing the Female Hysteric’s Mind

At first glance, the third affinity—fragmentation and traumatic state of the hysterical woman’s mind, verges on excessive vagueness and ambiguity. After all, the psychological ups and downs are always manifested through and on the body, which has already been discussed in detail before. However, several distinctive forms of narrative, such as monologues and asides in novels and operas, make it possible to investigate the mind of a female hysteric. As readers, we are privileged in knowing the secret torture of an insane mind.

For instance, Gwendolen Harleth constantly and obsessively questions herself whether she is wrong to have accepted Henleigh Mallinger Grandcourt, even with the knowledge that he has secret affairs with another woman who has already borne him several children. Her mind is a confusion of knots. When she cannot realize catharsis by hurting others, she can only fall back on herself for suffering. In a way, she follows the traumatic female tradition initiated by Ophelia in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, and anticipates Erika Kohut in Elfriede Jelinek’s *The Piano Teacher*.

For another instance, Elektra explicitly tells her own traumatic mental experience that accompanies her hatred and determination for revenge against her husband-killing mother in arias and recitatives. Musically, *Elektra* deploys dissonance, chromaticism and extremely fluid tonality in a way which recalls but moves beyond *Salome* of 1905. The bitonal or extended Elektra chord is a well known dissonance from the opera while harmonic parallelism is also prominent modernist technique. All the utterances of Elektra’s words of hysteria, often shown in an overly ecstatic form, as well as the Elektra chord of the music, argue more than enough for the powerful effect of female mental disturbance and distortion.

In the Anglo-American culture, the Victorian and Edwardian fragmentation and traumatic state of the female mind reveals a pessimistic outlook. Traumatic femininity is largely regarded as sheer split-up, crack, and thus deficiency, lack of female subjectivity or self in social and psychological terms. There is little belief in female hysterics’ potential or chance for any useful outlet for active catharsis or exorcism that enables them to come to terms with these emotional traumas that leaves them figuratively bloodied but spiritually unbowed, not to mention any heroic healing agency these women are actually capable of. Thus, apparently, their view secretly and inevitably endorses the old hypocritical practice in Victorian and Edwardian times—women with this kind of mind need to be either domestically disciplined for recovery, or sent to inhuman asylums, madhouses or psychiatry clinics for a better cure. Only in such places can these women be reduced to being blank sheets for new birth.

⁶ Cixous, Hélène and Catherine Clément. *The Newly Born Woman*. Trans. Betsy Wing. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 93 (1986). The italics are mine.

In the French culture, the same fragmentation in female hysterics brings in view a more romanticized, if not perversely optimistic, mindscape that is analogous to the dreamscape enjoyed by Zhuangzi, the great Chinese sage in his butterfly-like transformations. For these hysterics, in their outbursts, antagonisms against others are softened, their assigned roles are contingently escaped from, and real opportunities for self-development are perversely realized. In a way, no matter how fragmented or traumatic the mind is, it is invariably possible for the female hysterical mind to trudge into a post-traumatic period when they tend to grow mature and become resilient in a gloriously dissonant cacophony.

2.4 Identifying the Female Hysteric with Fetishistic Obsessions with a Certain Trivial or Eccentric Object

The fourth affinity among these female hysterics is their obsessive attention to a certain object or detail that tends to be beyond a normal mind.

For instance, before her wedding night, Gwendolen Harleth receives a delicate little enameled casket with a splendid diamond ring and a letter inside from the avenger Lydia Glasher. This apparently small event, together with Mr. Grandcourt's forceful presence, becomes a recurring nightmare for Gwendolen. Even in absence, this casket involved still haunts her mind, reminding her of her secret desires, her unjustified feat, and her ill-fated wedlock. In other words, this casket serves as a Wagnerian motif that perversely links Gwendolen's mental life, until she exclaims wildly in her sad honeymoon trip to Venice, again in a Wagnerian fashion, "I think we shall go on always, like the Flying Dutchman"⁷. The casket, like Pandora's Box, brings into open a host of unhealthy and desperate thoughts and feelings.

For another example, Strauss's *Salome*, the great dancing hysteric, "Goddess of immortal Hysteria" for Huysman's *Des Esseintes*, is obsessed with an object which is certainly bizarre enough to arouse a sense of terrible disgust—the severed head of Jochanaan (the opera's Germanic-Hebraic name for John the Baptist), the object of Salome's newly awakened passion. Thrice, she willfully repeats her desires, moving from "Ich mochte" (I would like to) to "Ich wunsche" (I want to) to "Ich will" (I will). For times, she insists on kissing Jochanaan's mouth. Eight times she repeats to Herod her demand for Jochanaan's head as the payment for her dance. In her final monologue to that head, her childlike willfulness comes together with the dangerous pathology in all its power. She again repeats several times that she has said she wanted to kiss his mouth and now she is going to do so, for she lives, while he is now dead. When she does kiss him, she sings: "There was a bitter taste on your lips. Was it the taste of blood? No! Then, perhaps it was the taste of love... They say that love has a bitter taste." ("was war ein bitterer Geschmack auf deinen Lippen. Has es nach Blut geschmeckt? Nein! Doch es schmeckte vielleicht nach Liebe... Sie sagen, dass die Liebe bitter schmecke.")

⁷ Eliot, George. *Daniel Deronda*. Ed. Graham Hardley. Oxford: Clarendon, 566 (1984).

In the Anglo-American culture, such a sensational display of morbid taste shown by a female hysteric in a certain object tends to be interpreted as a perverse, pathological spectacle that is easily preyed upon for voyeuristic usurpations and appropriation. Except for Bertha Mason, all the other female hysterics remain virgins when they first appear in the novels or operas discussed above. Their Vamp-like hysteria and angel-in-the-house virginity contradict each other, providing the “most sickening chord”⁸. In other words, obsession in either the casket or the head serves nothing more than to satisfy the hunger of the male gaze, thus repressing and depressing on the women’s part. The story behind the apparent “fetishism” is often left unexplored.

In the French culture, the same fetishistic obsession with a certain trivial or eccentric object on the part of female hysterics is not necessarily counted as regenerate or decadent. Instead, such apparent abnormalcy in female attention is sometimes inclined to empower the females, especially those strong-willed artists and writers in unexpected ways. Such descriptions as “medusa” and “femme fatale” lose their reductive meaning; “pathological glory” prevails, as if hysteria is a divine art. After all, in a largely male-dominated world, only the field of details and specifics is still open to female reappropriation. A start, no matter how small or insignificant at first glance, is potentially subversive in the long run. Through such radical acts as fetishistic obsession with objects and details, women can perversely gain active spectatorship, showing the undeniable polemics that they are also entitled to visual powers and authorities that used to be the exclusive domain of men. “Being gazed upon” is subtly shifted to “gazing at”.

3. TOWARD A BALANCE OF TWO CRITICAL TRADITIONS: A FUSION OF HUMANITY AND PHILOSOPHY, ESSENTIALISATION AND ROMANTICISATION

As can be seen above, confronted with the increasing complex relationship between Victorian and Edwardian femininity and hysteria, there is no denying that European feminist cultural theorists have indeed made active attempts to fight for women’s rights for a more truthful medical narrative history. However, despite the abundance of powerful and dynamic approaches, divergences in perspectives have made Anglo-American feminist scholars and their French Feminist counterparts adopt different interpretative strategies that are sometimes contradictory.

In my view, Anglo-American feminist scholars tend to be more realistic or humanistic, thus refraining from taking an overly intellectually rigorous and politically radical stance. In their minds, these various hysterical heroines in Victorian and Edwardian novels and operas discussed above are more life-like, instead of being merely written or sung texts, or subjects for philosophical investigations. The various traumatic experiences suffered by these female

⁸Schimidgall, Gary. “Imp of Perversity,” *Opera News*. 12 February: 13 (1977).

hysterics are just like those of the women made of flesh and blood. This is arguably their biggest and most admirable merit.

However, in the absence of a more philosophical and more audacious stance, any discussion of a feminist issue invariably loses its lasting appeal for lack of depth, being liable to “surface” labeling. In this light, many Anglo-American feminists’ refusal to see these hysterical women more philosophically is indeed troublesome and less than satisfactory. The hidden, potential dynamics of these repressed women are unjustly buried.

Compared to their Anglo-American counterparts, the French feminist scholars dare to delve into the hysterics’ assumed victimized bodies, voices, minds and behaviours, and actively and optimistically seek their positive meanings in fighting for women’s rights of discourse while subverting the gender roles. This is where their power and enlightenment lie.

However, the French perspective is not without its own demerits. Too many philosophical word plays and too irrationally radical wording sometimes tend to dilute themselves, verging on Absurdism for Absurdism’s sake. It is hard to know whether the feminists really care about their fellow sisters’ cause, or merely show off their amazing gifts for perception and expression.

Therefore, it is indeed of great urgency for these two perspectives to learn from each other, and strive to agree upon a both feasible and profound strategy in deconstructing the forged connections between women and hysteria as well as other maladies in their literary and operatic interpretations. Only when the best parts of the two traditions blend well with each other, can the feminist cause be eventually achieved.

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